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SOME THOUGHTS ON DEMOCRACY

I have sought without much success for a satisfying definition of Democracy. It was with pleasure, then, that I read and appropriated the one given in the *Atlantic Monthly* for August, 1915 (State Against Commonwealth, p. 281): "Democracy, like Christianity, stands or falls by a faith in the actual imperfections and the infinite worth of individual men." To this I would add — and an abiding sense of individual responsibility.

This comes from a sympathetic and understanding heart and is no mere dealing with words. Therefore it fills the need I have felt and I can gather my thoughts around it. Definitions are usually held to be very prosaic and tiresome and are justly so considered where they consist of verbiage alone and are not felt. There is no progress in science or human knowledge of any kind, however, without satisfactory definitions. The idea sought to be conveyed and clung to is vague and misty. Mistakes creep in and true knowledge suffers.

Democracy and Christianity are, at the time of this world upheaval, the subjects of much criticism and of some despair on the part of their supporters, and this is chiefly for lack of deeply felt definition and understanding. The same is often true of science. A few years ago a number of chemists seemed ready to give up the foundation-stone of their building because of the marvelous discoveries of radio-activity. This came from a lack of clear understanding of the definition of a theory in general and the atomic theory in particular.

There have been many definitions of Democracy and conceptions as to its essential elements, and men have struggled over them, committing crimes and working injustice in its name. This has also been the history of Christianity. If men had always held to the belief in the infinite worth of the individual and because of that belief had shown a tolerance and forgiveness for the imperfections, how differently history would read and how much less of "man's inhumanity to man" should we have to mourn! And yet no doctrines are more insisted upon by the Master. Until these lessons are learned there is scant trust to

be reposed in either Democracy or Christianity for the healing of the nations.

The great revolution, sweeping more than a century ago through France and all of Europe and reaching even our own shores, sought to establish the Rights of Man, and men dreamed that these rights were summed up in the cry for "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité." Poor Philippe Egalité was but typical of the misunderstanding, and yet humanity, blindly groping for its God, has constantly followed this gleam of Egalité as its guiding star.

Are we justified in thinking that in their declaration that all men are born free and equal our forefathers saw more clearly than the French? In one sense this declaration is an obvious untruth, as Mr. Lindsay points out, and for many years I have seen only the surface falsity of it. In one sense men are born anything but free and equal. From the swaddling clothes of the babe to the constitutional limitations of the man we are certainly far from free, at least to do as we please, and the inequality needs no argument. And yet within the prescribed paths of justice, right, and unselfish love we are as free as air and apart from fortuitous gifts, the talents of the parable, we are all equal and held to an equal responsibility. The infinite knows no degrees, and the true Ego lies at the bottom of all these things, and it alone, has infinite worth. Perhaps those who drew up our American Magna Charta saw as through a glass darkly the great truths of which they wrote. We can see more clearly, and they are our imperishable heritage. Let us understand and make them our own.

In thinking and speaking of Democracy and putting it into practice it is usual to take a partial view, the same which was emphasized in the beginnings of the French Revolution. It can readily be seen that such a view covers the least important element and one which cannot precede but may follow as a consequence of the faithful acceptance of the great principles. So, in our somewhat futile striving for Democracy, the fundamental ideas have commonly been lost sight of and the temporary, non-essential inequalities have been emphasized because they irked the most. For instance, it would seem absurd to stress the matter

of clothes, and yet this has had its influence always and has been made a part of the creed of great movements. Witness various sects and the "turning plain" of those who would adhere to their faith. And yet it is a part of human nature and must be reckoned with.

Our philosopher Teufelsdröckh reasons quite cogently thereon: "First, that man is a spirit and bound by invisible bonds to all men; secondly, that he wears clothes, which are the visible emblems of that fact." And so, "Red says to Blue, 'Be hanged and anatomized,' and Blue marches sorrowfully to the gallows."

It is very evident that there must be inequalities—differences, let us call them—of dress, manners, speech, intellect, character. If the leveling of these is essential to Democracy, then is the matter indeed hopeless and Democracy, after all, not very desirable.

We prate loudly of a democratic spirit in an educational institution. Sometimes we would bring it about by uniform clothing, or a common dining-hall, or by some arbitrary mixing up in the dormitories. We have "get-together" movements in churches and village communities with a due sense of condescension on the part of some and of hopeful climbing on the part of others. And yet the matter cannot be so easily attained. Doubtless such gatherings have their uses. I would do nothing to discourage them. I imagine, however, that little of permanent satisfaction is to be derived from them and that they have as little effect on the bringing in of Democracy as once-a-week Christians have on Christianity.

It may be just as effective to eat with a knife as with a fork. A more real Democracy existed when fingers alone were relied on. But, after all is said and done, the one who uses the fork in transferring food to the mouth considers himself the gentleman and regards as a boor the one who uses the knife. The distinction between Red and Blue is even graver than the matter of clothes. And so in the matter of manners or of speech. It is quite impossible to derive the same pleasure or profit from the conversation of one who murders our good American language as from that of one who uses it correctly. Tricks of

speech and of manners will continue to decide the circles into which churches and communities are divided. If education does away with these, then fresh ones will be devised, for man will continue to exercise his inalienable right of selecting his own associates and friends. If the cleavage is not along these artificial, insignificant lines, then it will come along the truer lines of tastes and purposes and character which make up congeniality and uncongeniality, likes and dislikes. Our very human limitations make smaller eddies in the great flood inevitable and indispensable.

To seek for Democracy by such scratching of the superficies is but child's play. Yet Democracy is eminently worth striving for—in fact, the true goal of all our striving, in spite of the pathetic hopes of those who would place their reliance in the deified State. How, then, is it to be gained?

We must go back to the definition. The recognition of the infinite worth of the individual lies at the bottom of it all. The injustice and crimes of capital, labor, and society in general are due in part to the lack of any true belief in this. If it is made a cardinal point of our creed, then the efforts to develop the individual and help him make the most of himself will redouble. That is the high ideal at the basis of our system of public education if we do but understand it aright. Not the training of the few to give them the advantage over the many, not the training of leaders solely, not the training of the many that they may become efficient parts of the machine, but the equal opportunity for all to grow into full and perfect manhood and render such service as may be possible. And education is a big, broad term and covers far more than the training of hand and mind, which, in itself, is no panacea for the ills of mankind though often rated as such. To the Greek it meant training in self-mastery, and no higher nor more comprehensive definition has ever been given. Such self-mastery alone can bless humanity.

There has been much criticism of our educational system, and especially the higher institutions, in recent years and some of it is justified. Owing to this criticism in part, but much more to a genuine desire for excelling, many changes have been brought about. Quite possible all of them have not been for the better,

for wisdom in such matters is a slow and painful acquisition. Men still fall into the old error of mistaking *vox populi* for *vox dei* and give the people what they want rather than what they should have. But, in the main, the college of to-day is stronger, higher, and truer to its great purposes than ever before. And, contrary to the opinion of some, the American college has drawn further away from the German pattern, if it ever was strongly influenced by it. The most striking growth and that of the utmost importance has been in the direction of true Democracy. Surely, nothing can be more necessary in the training of the youth of a land where "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are supposed to be assured by democratic institutions.

Serious importance can scarcely be attached to attempts at eliminating cliques, fraternities, and exclusive snobbishness on the part of students. These are more or less childish ebullitions and have their dangers rather for those who indulge in them than for the mass. After all, stern treatment of them is much like the forbidding of titles by our organic law and springs from the French Revolution conception of equality as the sum and substance of Democracy. Do not American citizens in multitudes wear the honorary titles of judge, colonel, professor, boss, etc., sometimes given in affection and sometimes in ridicule? There is a story of a man upon whom the conferring of an honorary title seemed imminent who gave notice that he was too big to deserve it and too proud to wear it. Is there not here the opportunity for the cultivation of a little healthy personal pride? Need one feel hurt or slighted at not being chosen for an intimate friend? At least he is at liberty to choose his own associates and form his own friendships. Why should I be troubled over the fact that Mr. Jones does not invite me to dine with him? Either, the loss is his, since he will not hear my choice anecdotes nor enjoy my delectable "line of conversation"; or, if my qualifications as a guest are below par and there is really no loss to Mr. Jones, then no amount of chagrin on my part will mend the matter. It is for me to make my company something that cannot well be spared. And this is possible for even the humblest of us.

In our quiet little village, a few years ago, there were no Sun-

day trains. The colored barber owned a buggy and an old white horse, and in his Sunday leisure commonly conveyed marooned strangers to a town some twelve miles distant where they might catch a train.

"Tom," said I on a Friday morning, "Max O'Rell will be here to-morrow night to lecture. You will have to take him over to the train on Sunday morning. And remember, Tom, he is a Frenchman, so you will have to brush up your French."

Now, like all darkies, Tom dearly loved to gossip and especially to try out his big words on the chance stranger. His face dropped at the prospect of a two-hours' drive with one who might as well be dumb so far as conversational entertainment was concerned. But he was game and undertook the job.

Some days later I met him and asked how he liked talking French with Max O'Rell. His face beamed as he replied :

"Why, boss, I didn't have to speak no French. De gemmun could talk English jes' as good as I could, and when we got over dar he giv' me half a dollar for de pleasure ob my conversation."

What a 'democratic' titbit it must have been for Max O'Rell! I am sure Tom would have figured in his next book if Max had lived much longer. Tom told me afterwards that his discourse had been on "de footprints ob de fust five centuries," which I found was the title of a subscription book some peddler had sold him and which he found choice fishing ground for the imposing words he loved so much.

But there has been a more real growth in Democracy in the schools in several other ways, and this has been in some sort a recognition of the infinite worth of the individual and a deeper sense of individual responsibility. Responsibility of the individual is the one addition I would make to the definition cited at the outset. Without it there is a fatal incompleteness and it can scarcely be claimed as implied. The infinite worth is recognized, the imperfections are noted, but there is both an individual and a community responsibility for these imperfections. "Bear ye one another's burdens," says Paul, the lawyer and Christian leader, and almost in the same breath, "Every man shall bear his own burdens."

There is just now a quiet but astonishing growth on the part

of many colleges in our land in their efforts to conserve and develop the potentialities of the young lives committed to their care. In the past for years the plan, if there was a plan, has seemed to be a counter-part of that in European institutions of letting the strong swimmer survive of those cast in the pool and the rest sink if they could do no better. And the waters were often pitifully beyond their depth.

That these weak swimmers have their value also and may possibly be saved might be classed as one of our modern discoveries. The fuller meaning of the phrases "greatest good to the largest number" and "equal opportunity for every one" has been borne in upon these college faculties and they are devoting much thought and energy to the problems involved, and with some success.

Again, the altruism of service, the practical application of the parable of the talents, is being vigorously urged. "It is not what you get out of life but what you put into it that counts," says one distinguished university president. Perhaps the phenomenal increase in the number of men trained at the expense of the State has much to do with the widespread feeling of obligation to be in truth light-bearers who shall light the torches of others. It is a quiet work and, as is proper, has been going on largely without observation, yet the sum total of it would, if we did but know it, bring fresh hope for our Democracy.

Then there is the student government movement which is sweeping through our colleges. Surely the best training for young democrats who are to govern themselves and others in after life is to begin this under the hands of those who are older and wiser and who can advise, encourage, help. The so-called honor system, which is often a part of this student government, is, when properly administered and freed from abuses, a splendid lesson in individual responsibility.

There is still too little instruction given in the duties and privileges of citizenship, but this is being rapidly remedied. I wish it might be followed up after leaving college by instruction given through the great political parties as is done in Switzerland, but one can hope for slight aid from that source in the present condition of self-seeking and mendacity of our parties.

The "patience of hope and the labor of love" is the old cry of Christianity. The same divine qualities are called for in the development of Democracy which shall free the individual and bring us to a true conception of equality.

As to this equality, Mr. Lindsay says: "The democratic belief in equality has two sides: It is, firstly, a belief that no man, however superior he may be, is good enough or wise enough to possess irresponsible rule over other men. And, secondly, a belief that, however men may differ in character or ability, every man has an absolute worth and should not be used as a means for any purpose, no matter how exalted. A man may sacrifice himself for others or for a cause but others have no right to sacrifice him."

"Wondrous," says Carlyle,—crabbed philosopher but far-sighted prophet,—"wondrous, that in the huge mass of Evil, as it rolls and swells, there is ever some Good working imprisoned; working towards deliverance and triumph."

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